

Pilot Project
Using Conservation Plans on Private Lands
To Address Border Issues

Pilot Program

Proposal Summary

Objective: Install and maintain a buffer zone/security corridor on private lands through the development and the implementation of conservation plans. The conservation plans would be developed under the auspices of the local soil and water conservation district. Best management practices such as brush management, range seeding, cross-fencing and prescribed burning would be implemented as per the Field Office Technical Guide of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. The buffer zone could be anywhere from 150 to 300 feet wide and run parallel to the Rio Grande River. The initial goal would be to install 5-10 miles and monitor usefulness and effectiveness. The buffer zone, when fully implemented, would facilitate efforts to curtail the spread of the fever tick and other issues common to the border.

Funding and administration: Project funding, at a level of approximately \$540,000.00 would be channeled through the Rio Bravo RC&D, which in turn, would make a cost-share allocation to the local soil and water conservation district. Cost-share assistance as high as 100% would be provided to landowners participating in the program. The buffer zone created through this project may possibly qualify for enrollment in the Grassland Reserve Program administered by the USDA.

Introduction

The Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Program is a nation-wide program. The purpose of the RC&D program is to accelerate the conservation, development and utilization of natural resources, improve the general level of economic activity, and to enhance the environment and standard of living in designated RC&D areas.

Established in 1973, Rio Bravo RC&D Area, Inc. is a 501 (C) (3) non-profit organization that addresses natural resource conservation and community development in eleven counties in deep South Texas including Brooks, Cameron, Duval, Hidalgo, Jim Hogg, Jim Wells, Kenedy, Kleberg, Starr, Webb, Willacy, and Zapata. The **MISSION is to assist local leadership to develop and implement strategies for orderly development, wise use and conservation of natural resources.** The **VISION** is to provide a long range planning assistance to rural communities to increase job opportunities, improve the local economy, improve existing infrastructure and services, and improve the standard of living. The original sponsors of the Rio Bravo RC&D were the Soil and Water Conservation Districts in Webb, Zapata, Jim Hogg and Starr Counties. In June 1973 they asked for help from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to improve the economy through orderly development and conservation of resources

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through the Resource Conservation and Development program (RC&D). After the USDA approved this request in July 1973, the Rio Bravo Resource Conservation and Development Area was established. The RC&D Council was established to represent the sponsors and carry out an Area Plan of action.

Early sponsors of the Rio Bravo RC&D recognized the opportunities available to not-for-profit-organizations and filed for an official determination letter from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). In June of 1973, IRS issued a letter of determination recognizing Rio Bravo Area, Inc. as a 501 © (3) organization.

The affairs of the Rio Bravo RC&D are managed by the member board of directors which consists of a representative from each county served. Rio Bravo RC&D supports an open membership for individuals and organizations.

Problem Statement

There are two issues very pertinent to the border region included in this proposal. The first issue is the fever tick that has plagued this region for several decades. The second issue is one that has emerged more recently, border security.

Conservation plans have been in existence since the Dust Bowl days. The Rio Bravo RC&D strongly support the concept of taking a conservation plan on privately owned land to a level where by the outcome, derived through the implementation of various best management practices, can be used to address both the fever tick, and border security issues. The outcome would be a security corridor facilitating the missions assigned to agencies such as the Border Patrol (BP) and Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS).

Project Objectives

The primary objective will be to develop and maintain a security corridor parallel to the Rio Grande River through the use of best management practices such as brush management, range seeding, cross fencing and prescribed burning. Experience indicates that a high fence would work best. Both the BP and APHIS have indicated that the visibility and containment feature of the corridor will enhance their mission.

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Project Methods

The idea behind this proposal is to develop conservation plans on privately-owned lands and then provide cost share assistance to install certain best management practices contained in the plan. The cost-share could be as high as 100%, being that the beneficial effects lend themselves more to border issues than to the ranching operation itself.

Cost-share assistance funds will be channeled through either one or multiple soil and water conservation districts (SWCD). Landowners interested in voluntarily participating would apply through the local SWCD. A conservation plan containing all the necessary practices would be developed. All practices would meet the standards and specifications found in the Field Office Technical Guide. Upon completion, the landowner would be reimbursed for expenses incurred.

The BP and APHIS would make arrangements with the landowners for beneficial utilization of security corridor.